

Setting the Stage

The Culture and Kingdoms of West Africa

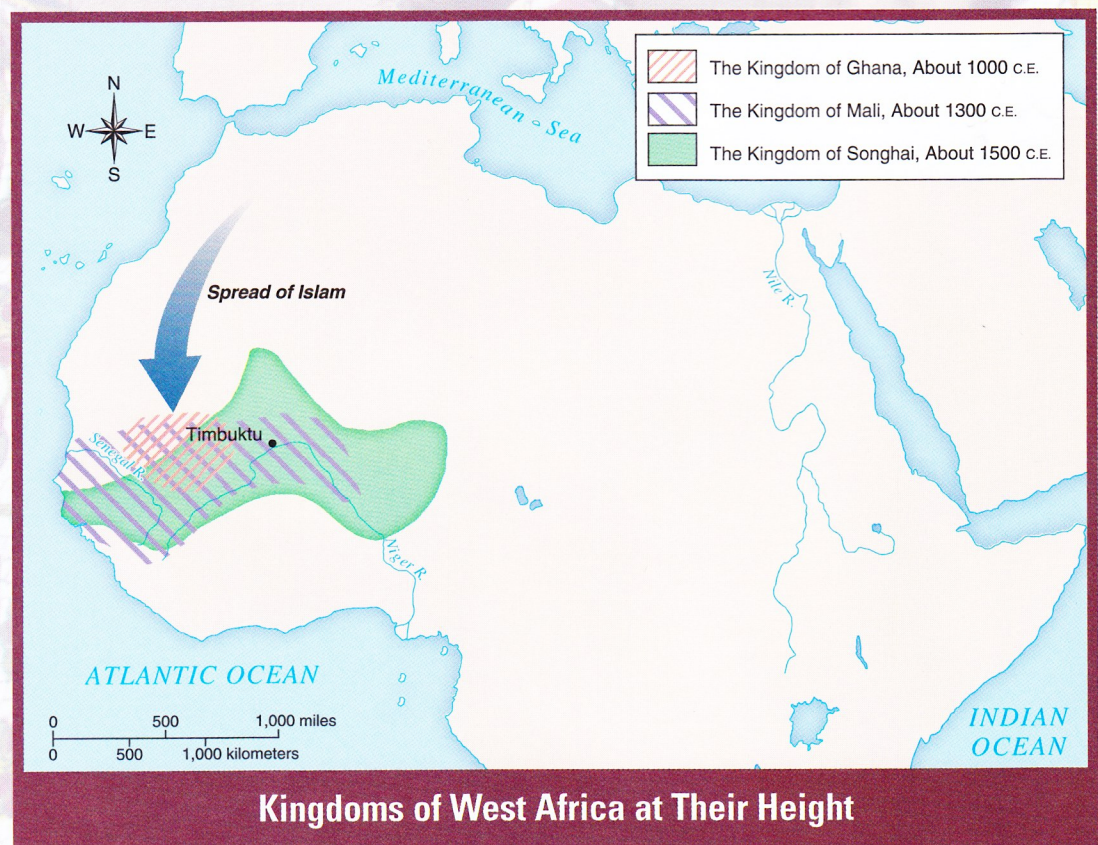
In the last unit, you learned about the rise of Islam. In this unit, you will explore the history and culture of West Africa between about 500 and 1600 c.e.

Africa is south of Europe, between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. To the north is the Mediterranean Sea.

Africa is the second largest continent on Earth, after Asia. It can be divided into four main regions: West Africa, North Africa, Central and South Africa, and East Africa.

Several vegetation zones form belts across Africa (see the second map on the opposite page). Four types of zones are especially important for our study of West Africa because of their effect on life there. Deserts are sandy, hot, and dry. A semidesert is a somewhat less dry zone of grasses and shrubs. In West Africa, this zone is called the Sahel. A savanna consists of grassland with tall grasses and scattered trees. Forest zones have the most abundant vegetation.

In ancient times, farming communities developed in the region south of the Sahara Desert. Rivers such as the Senegal and the Niger helped make the



land fertile. The rivers also provided fish and served as trade routes within the region.

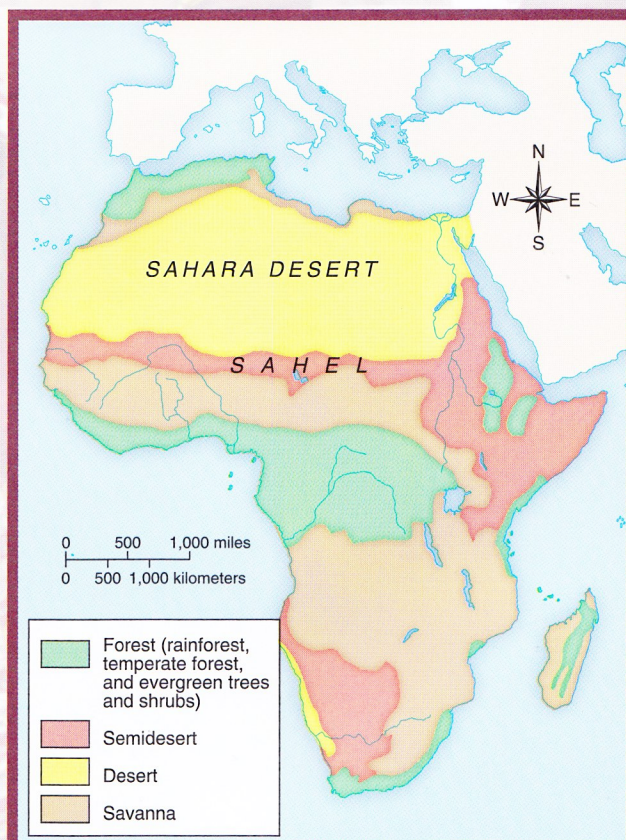
For centuries, West Africa had limited contact with lands to the north because travel across the vast Sahara Desert was very difficult. By the late 700s C.E., however, an increasing number of Arab Muslim traders from North Africa were crossing the Sahara. Trans-Saharan trade played a key role in the growth of the three great medieval kingdoms of West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

Trade brought cultural change as well as goods to West Africa. In the 700s C.E., traders from North Africa brought Islam to the region. Islam had a deep impact on West African culture. The trading city of Timbuktu, on the Niger River, was a vital center of Islamic learning under both Mali and Songhai rule.

In this unit, you'll learn about the kingdoms and culture of West Africa. Let's begin our exploration by taking a closer look at how early societies developed in this region.



Regions of Africa



Vegetation Zones of Africa